

New York THEATRE CRITICS' Reviews 1943

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†"Men in Shadow" opened Wednesday, March 10th, at the Morosco Theatre.

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

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NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"	NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

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"Men in Shadow"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
March 11, 1943

Saboteurs

By HOWARD BARNES

THE toughest of the war plays arrived at the Morosco last night. "Men in Shadow" is an out-and-out melodrama, in which legs are set, necks broken and men stabbed to the accompaniment of rough language. Since it deals with a group of American and British saboteurs in occupied France, the very toughness of the show is its greatest virtue. The writing rarely matches the subject matter and the construction is often contrived, but this dra-

matic importation from London has something to say and it says it in vivid and exciting theatrical terms.

The play has been running in London for many months. Considerable revisions have undoubtedly been made for Max Gordon's local presentation, but it is safe to assume that Mary Hayley Bell's original script is what makes the show so effective. She has considered a group of cracked-up flyers, hiding out in a windmill on the French coast, killing Nazis, directing air raids and sheltering their comrades when they have been downed. It is a pity that she did not bring more eloquence to her task of celebrating the underground movement, but she is to be applauded for her sense of incisive and pertinent melodrama.

Her drama is fortunate in having Roy Hargrave as director and leading man of the Broadway production. "Men in Shadow" is the sort of realistic and uncompromising make-believe which is his special forte. As the

leader of the sabotage ring, who recites dirty flourishes when a smashed-up aviator is being put together again, or gets sick after killing German spies and soldiers, he keeps the action keyed to a mood of violence and suspense. Meanwhile, he has directed the show with vigor and a keen appreciation of its lurid qualities.

When he falters, it is generally the play's fault. The scenes in which he attempts to give genuine depth to the characters are hard to take. Some of the more explicit plotting is a bit obvious. The fact remains that he has packed provocative material with a tremendous wallop. Michelette Burani is excellent as the elderly peasant who hides the saboteurs on her farm; Everett Sloane contributes restrained portrayal of one of the saboteurs and Ernest Graves is excellent as the German spy masquerading as a British aviator. "Men in Shadow" is not in any sense a notable play, but it makes much of the tough martial melodramatics which constitute the work. It ought to make a tough picture, too.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
March 11, 1943

There Is a Raft of Thrills in 'Men in Shadow' at the Morosco

"Men in Shadow," drama by Mary Hayley Bell. Produced by Max Gordon at the Morosco Theatre, New York, March 10, 1943.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

SYLVIA ASHLEY FAIRBANKS was one of last night's audience at the Morosco, where "Men in Shadow" was the drama of the evening. Seeing her stirred a thought of the late Douglas Fairbanks, and of how Doug would have loved playing this thriller about saboteurs in occupied France.

The play, written by an English woman, Mary Hayley Bell, who probably is about as big as a minute and as belligerent as a house wren, is a combination of thrills and athletics, staged with perfect mechanical skill

against a notably effective background of scenery and present wartime conditions.

As I have advised several times before this season, notably in the case of the drama called "Counter-attack," if it's thrills you like with your war dramas, here is another heaping portion.

In this one that perfect melo-dramatist, Roy Hargrave (I hope you remember him in "Bill of the Century"), heads a trio of airmen who have crashed in France and taken to saboteuring to confuse the Heines and further the underground work of the fighting French.

In the Old Mill

They hide out in the upper story of an abandoned mill near a French farmhouse, and they would have completed whatever assignment took them there and been well on their way about the time the play opens. If it had not been for the appearance of another flyer, an American in this version, who has bailed out of his plane and broken both legs in his fall.

Their problem then becomes excitingly complicated. How to get away without abandoning their helpless buddy? And how to move him when they move?

There are, I think, two as skillfully staged and acted scenes of imagined crisis as I have seen staged in years. One when Michelette Burani, playing an aging French woman, sets the legs of the flyer while his friends hold him down and tell him smutty lyrics to anesthetize his mind. The other when they maneuver the injured man's escape.

In between these scenes there are two or

three gory and exciting murders, and any number of suspenseful moments when all action is halted and everybody, on stage and off, suspends his breathing until he discovers what new danger is approaching with measured tread just from the side of the scenery.

Good Fighting

Also there is one of those knock-down-and-roll-over twice, twist-the-arm-and-break-the-neck stage fights, the like of which you have not seen on the stage and in the flesh these many seasons. If it doesn't put Ernest Graves, who gets the worst of it, in the hospital before the run of the play ends I'll be surprised.

Hargrave is always master of the melodrama, a tense, sensitive, taut-nerved hero who hates to kill and sickens at the sight of blood ordinarily. Consequently it is around him that the excitement swirls. He never lets his audience down.

Mrs. Burani is excellent in support, as indicated, and great help is given Mr. Hargrave by Everett Sloane, Francis de Sales, Dean Harens, who plays the injured lad most realistically, and Joseph de Santis, a linguistic expert as well as a good actor.

The scenic set by Frederick Fox is also tremendously effective. Mr. Hargrave did the staging without missing a trick that I noticed.

"Men in Shadow" makes no claim to a convincing psychology, if any. Nor to any definite objective as wartime propaganda. It just a war melodrama staged with such skill that its audiences will have little time to ponder its serious values, or lack of them.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
March 11, 1943

Men in Shadow Opens At Morosco Theater

By BURTON RASCOE

MEN IN SHADOW, which opened at the Morosco last night, is an amateurish attempt by Mary Hayley Bell and Roy Hargrave to write a Grand Guignol melodrama with a war setting. As those who saw the Grand Guignol Players of Paris when they offered a repertory of their thrillers in New York in 1923 will remember, the management of horror and suspense on the stage requires a very deft and special technique of surprise in order to be effective. Miss Bell and Mr. Hargrave are not skilled in this technique; they have not progressed beyond the tricks Owen Davis discarded nearly 40 years ago.

Technically, "Men in Shadow" is about on the level with the early movie serial, "The Perils of Pauline." Max Gordon, the producer, who hitherto has associated himself only with some of the finest offerings of the theater—such as "The Jazz Singer," "Dodsworth," "The Great Waltz," "Pride and Prejudice," "The Farmer Takes a Wife," "St. Helena" and "Othello"—probably has a brow so high that he has never learned what has been going on in the slums of the drama, and he was probably fetched by the idea that a good third of the

dialogue in this play is in untranslated French and German. Scholar and linguist that Mr. Gordon is, it is possible that his admiration for the authors' employment of the authentic patois of the Normandy coast and of Hitler's cranks German blinded him to the crudities of the melodrama.

Variety in Violent Death

One German is done to death in the second act in a prolonged exhibition of jiu-jitsu. He is maneuvered close to the footlights for his final agonies, his face held to the audience in a hammock while the hero slowly tortures him with repeated blows on the side of the neck and then cracks his spine quite audibly. Another German is stealthily stabbed to death and still another is dispatched by a daring leap from the loft of an old mill as he climbs the stairs. The authors tease the audience for 10 minutes with the idea that the hero, in the guise of a whittling idiot, is going to fix a German officer and then disappoint us by letting the officer get away.

In the last act we learn from a long dialogue between the hero and the American pilot, who has both legs broken and in crude splints, that they are going to accomplish the impossible—escape through a high trap door that leads to the roof of the mill. The trick of elevating the man with the broken legs to the trap door is accomplished all right. The audience, however, is left to figure out how four men are going to escape in broad daylight from the roof of a mill that has just been surrounded by the Germans.

Setting Better Than the Play

The action takes place between Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning in an old mill adjoining a farmhouse on the French coast. A grouching American flyer, who has taken up the work of a saboteur in occupied France and has just succeeded in killing the Gestapo hangman of the district, is carrying

on with an English pal and with the help of French peasants. He has taken up quarters in the loft of an old mill, when an American flyer is brought in with both his legs broken as the result of a crash. This complicates the chief saboteur's problems, because his success depends upon mobility, and he now has the crippled soldier on his hands. Then another chap shows up who has an exaggerated English accent, wears an RAF captain's uniform and has all his papers in order. If he were sandwich signs saying "I am a spy," he could not have been more unmistakably one from his very first words. The suspense, therefore is managed from the end of the first act until the beginning of the second, because you are sure he can be a spy, for the authors have made it so obvious that he is. That's where the authors fool you; he is a spy.

The setting, by Frederick Fox, is the best thing about the play—a really superb piece of realistic designing. The principal role is carried by Roy Hargrave in that manner of striding back and forth across the stage the old heavies used to use in the ten-twenty-third. Michelette Burani, who speaks entirely in French patois, was effective as the peasant woman. Joseph de Santis, who also speaks certainly but French (and like Miss Burani, speaks quite a bit of it), did not enunciate with any clarity. Mr. Hargrave speaks French about a third of the time, and four other characters speak nothing but German. That leaves but two of the characters who speak English, when they speak at all. Mr. Hargrave in his collaboration with Miss Bell has certainly tricked himself up to the point that the play is practically a monologue by him, a large part of it in French.

With the French and German translated into English and at a popular price, there might be enough thrill hunters to support a fair run of the play. Otherwise I fear not.

"Men in Shadow"

NEW YORK POST
March 11, 1943

"Men in Shadow" a Melodrama of the French Underground

By WILELLA WALDORF

MEN IN SHADOW," a London success since last autumn, was produced here at the Morosco Theatre last night and turned out to be the best of the wartime blood-and-thunder melodramas about the Nazi occupation of conquered European territory. Some of it is over-deliberate and less spine-tingling than it ought to be, but the second act provides some genuine thrills.

In London the play concerns a group of British aviators shot down across the Channel, devoting their efforts to helping the underground movement in France. For Broadway several of them have been turned into Americans, complete with Yankee slang, double-talk and chewing gum.

The ring-leader is a pilot named Lew who crashed over two years back, and knowing he'd never fly again, decided to stick around and help the French instead of being invalided back home.

Lew has lost his flying nerve. He gets

disxy sometimes just climbing into the loft above the old mill used as a hide-out. More than anything else he hates killing, yet he murders three Nazis with professional dispatch in "Men in Shadow."

Strewn With Nazi Corpses

The play is a stern and corpse-strewn melodrama about the serious business of preparing France for the day when the "U" movement becomes a genuine uprising. When Nazis interfere, they must be exterminated. Lew attends to these details with deadly efficiency, even if he does turn sick for a while after it's over. A high-strung, slightly neurotic, tough-guy is something of a novelty in melodrama, and somehow or other more convincing than the traditional hero built like Tarzan and given to acting like a Hollywood glamor man.

"Men in Shadow" doesn't bother much with anything beyond the stern business of sabotaging Hitler. The only woman in the cast is not a Charmaine or Grisellette, but a buxom old peasant woman lovingly referred to as "Cherlie," whose coffee is good and whose son, Mor, is one of the conspirators.

The action is restricted to the old mill next to "Cherlie's" farmhouse because Lew rescues a bomber pilot who has bailed out into a tree and broken both legs in the process. The fellow's legs are dressed and put in splints while the audience looks on, and although a German regiment is en route and the mill is supposed to be under attack, the occupants can hardly move out with a disabled man on their hands.

Gymnastic Mr. Hargrave

Roy Hargrave, who plays Lew effectively,

'MEN IN SHADOW'

"Men in Shadow," play by Mary Hayley Bell, staged by Roy Hargrave, setting by Frederick Fox, presented by Max Gordon at the Morosco Theatre Wednesday, March 10, 1943, with the following cast:

Mor	Joseph de Santis
German Captain	Peter von Zerneck
German Lieutenant	Peter Knego
Cherlie	Michelle Burani
Kenny	Everett Sloane
Polly	Francis De Sales
Lew	Roy Hargrave
Wally	Dean Harena
Enshaw	Ernest Graves
German Sergeant	Martin Brandt
German Corporal	Michael Ingram

has also directed the production with painstaking care, exhibiting considerable gymnastic prowess and at one point using a knowledge of jiu-jitsu to break the back of a spy in their midst.

Dean Harena as the wounded flier, Michelle Burani as the French "Cherlie," Everett Sloane as a double-talker, the Americans, and the rest of the company support Mr. Hargrave well.

Somehow we had expected a good deal more of "Men in Shadow" than ever actually develops, except for a few stretches in the second act, but it is still the best of the anti-Nazi thrillers to date and will do well enough until something more consistently spine-chilling comes along.

NEW YORK TIMES
March 11, 1943

'Men in Shadow,' a Melodrama With a Setting of Conquered France, Is Imported From London to Morosco Theatre

By LEWIS NICHOLS

BOTH Mary Hayley Bell, who wrote "Men in Shadow" for London, and Joseph Fields, who reportedly touched it up for the American trade, have a feeling that melodrama should live up to its name. In the play Max Gordon brought last evening to the Morosco they have not been niggardly with good red

blood, for they offer two killings by knife and one by strangulation, as well as a bit of surgery unparalleled on the stage during the last few years. It therefore seems like only a perverse form of churlishness to suggest this morning that not all is well with the play at the Morosco and that it takes more than mass murder to provide a completely satisfactory evening in the theatre.

The trouble well may be that, despite the sudden death, the jiu-jitsu and the athletics that go on in "Men in Shadow," the play seems singularly quiet. Its characters, who are saboteurs, grounded fliers and spies in a town in conquered France, engage in almost interminable conversations between bursts of realistic bloodshed, and they are talks which for the most part do not develop interest in the characters as individuals and thus do not develop interest in the play. Further, a fair quantity of "Men in Shadow" is the old-school traditional of ten-twenty-third drama from which the Forties have advanced, at least by a degree or so.

The scene is the loft of an old unused mill, a loft for which Frederick Fox has contrived an extremely effective setting. Living there, with the assistance of the farmer's family, are

a group of saboteurs, French and English, and brought there is an American flier whose legs have been broken. The Nazis come on a billet in the town, and there is a German spy who meets his particular end after a fight in which one of the heroes deliberately and lingeringly breaks his neck. The other victims of the evening also are German; the surgery is done on the American flier, whose legs are set without anesthetics—a scene that is either good or horrifying, depending on a personal point of view.

Roy Hargrave, an old hand at melodrama, is the star and also has directed. His movements are tense and abrupt; it is quite possible too tense and abrupt for every minute of the play. As a director he has done one or two things that are excellent. The Germans speak German, the French speak French; Mr. Hargrave has so staged the accompanying actions that an audience need know neither language to understand what is going on. In the company, in the role of an elderly French peasant, is Michelle Burani, who gives a splendid portrait, and others in the cast are Everett Sloane, Dean Harena—the American flier—and Ernest Graves. "Men in Shadow" still is running in London, where it has played for many months.

NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN
March 11, 1943

Roy Hargrave Stars in 'Men in Shadow'

New Melodrama of Allied Underground in France Opens at the Morosco

By JOHN ANDERSON

IF YOU were looking for excitement you should be able to find it in a picturesque old mill on the French coast watching a group of English, American, and French saboteurs drop monkey-wrenches in the Nazi war machine.

But you will find it in satisfying quantity, I suspect, only in the second act of Mary Hayley Bell's melodrama, "Men in Shadow," which Max Gordon brought to the Morosco last night. There, for the space of half an hour or so, in the superb and darkly cavernous setting designed by Frederick Fox, is the straining tension of danger and the thrill of desperate deeds. There, with the lethal grace and passionate precision of a

matador Roy Hargrave in three fascinating homicides reaches the pitch of a performance so taut and so vividly sustained that it seems to be carrying the play. The play needs it, even if it doesn't quite deserve it.

Remarkable Portrait

Mr. Hargrave gives us, in fact, the sort of obsessed performance, with neurotic overtones, that made "Blind Alley" a memorable experience in the theatre. As an angry, restless, infinitely crafty young American aviator, working underground in occupied France with a handful of Allied adventurers, he presents a remarkable portrait.

He pounces panther-like upon one victim and breaks his back (with a shattering sound effect); he fells another as he might a steer in an abattoir, and launches himself full-blinded at the third down a stairwell with suitable deadliness. And since killing makes the character giddy with nausea Mr. Hargrave provides peculiar but spectacular symptoms of nervous derangement. Oh, it's a piece of work, all right, this performance, clinical and galvanizing.

Agonizing Scenes

Unhappily for her play, fore and aft of this homicidal festive, Miss Bell has packed most of her thrills in one basket. It takes her a long, rambling, and explanatory first act to set the characters and start the action. The suspense is never established firmly enough to let the rest of the play tug against it with mounting strain and heightening effect. The author has to stop, now and then, to rewind the clockwork, and when she does this play-gone-at-heart, slips back off the edge of his seat.

In the absence of inventive details to tighten the plot, Miss Bell is forced to such obvious dodges as watching the clock and tricking up false alarms as the Nazis advance on the suspected headquarters of the saboteurs. The big problem of the saboteurs is how they are going to save a young American aviator, with both legs broken, when they cannot lift him to an attic hideaway. They finally do so in an agonizing scene straight out of the Grand Guignol, and the third act ends with the Germans baffled and tricked.

The play has been running in London since last Fall, and while the playbill mentions no trans-Atlantic alteration, it is reported that Joseph Fields worked over the script, changing the characters and the dialogue for New York consumption. Obviously, however, he has been unable to correct the structural defects, so the play slows down in talk, and loses its lunge.

Mr. Gordon has given it a handsome and effective production, with its huge wooden-flanged gears, and wonderful gloom, is a notable contribution, and there are some excellent performances, especially those of Michelle Burani, as a wise and patient French peasant, Everett Sloane, as a tough-minded and hard-bitten assistant saboteur, and Ernest Graves as the German officer on counter-espionage whose back bone Mr. Hargrave so brilliantly snaps.

As a branch of "The Moon Is Down" department, the melodrama is, I suppose, the best of the Broadway sabotage plays, though it still leaves the suspicion that the authors are a down, too. Certainly they haven't risen to their opportunities.